



## Zen and the art of living mindfully: The health-enhancing potential of zen aesthetics

Item type	Article
Authors	Lomas, Tim; Etcoff, Nancy L.; Van Gordon, William; Shonin, Edo
Citation	Lomas, T. et al (2017) 'Zen and the Art of Living Mindfully: The Health-Enhancing Potential of Zen Aesthetics', Journal of Religion and Health, DOI: 10.1007/s10943-017-0446-5
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-017-0446-5">10.1007/s10943-017-0446-5</a>
Publisher	Springer
Journal	Journal of Religion and Health
Rights	Archived with thanks to Journal of Religion and Health
Downloaded	13-Jan-2019 02:43:54
Link to item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10545/621756">http://hdl.handle.net/10545/621756</a>

**Zen and the art of living mindfully:  
The health-enhancing potential of Zen aesthetics**

**Journal of Religion and Health, 2017**

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Note: this paper may not match the final version in the Journal of Religion and Health.

### Abstract

Amidst the burgeoning enthusiasm for mindfulness in the West, there is a concern that the largely secular ‘de-contextualized’ way in which it is being harnessed is denuding it of its potential to improve health and wellbeing. As such, efforts are underway to ‘re-contextualize’ mindfulness, explicitly drawing on the wider framework of Buddhist ideas and practices in which it was initially developed. This paper aims to contribute to this, doing so by focusing on Zen Buddhism, and in particular on Zen aesthetic principles. It concentrates on the seven principles identified by Shin’ichi Hisamatsu (1971) in his classic text *Zen and the Fine Arts*: *kanso* (simplicity); *fukinsei* (asymmetry); *koko* (austere sublimity); *shizen* (naturalness); *daisuzoku* (freedom from routine); *sei-jaku* (tranquillity); and *yūgen* (profound grace). The presence of these principles in works of art is seen as reflecting and communicating insights that are central to Buddhism, such as non-attachment. Moreover, these principles do not only apply to the creation and appreciation of art, but have clear applications for treating health-related disorders, and improving quality of life more generally. This paper makes the case that embodying these principles in their lives can help people enhance their levels of psychosomatic wellbeing, and come to a truer understanding of the essence of mindful living.

Keywords: mindfulness; psychosomatic wellbeing; non-pharmacological interventions; aesthetics; art; Zen; health-related disorders.

### **Re-Contextualizing Mindfulness**

Research exploring the applications of mindfulness for improving health and wellbeing has increased substantially in recent years. Shonin, Van Gordon, and Griffiths (2015) report that in 2014, approximately 700 papers were published on mindfulness, representing almost a *tenfold* increase compared to the number of papers published just 10 years previously in 2004. However, this emergent interest has been accompanied by an increasing concern with the way in which mindfulness is being constructed for, and understood by, its new Western audiences. Foremost among these concerns is the way in which mindfulness has been largely ‘de-contextualized’ from its antecedent Buddhist roots, being generally presented in a secular format without reference to the wider nexus of ideas and practices in which it was originally developed (Van Gordon, Shonin, Griffiths, & Singh, 2015a), and instead operationalized using Western psychological concepts and discourses, most notably cognitive theories of attention (Bishop et al., 2004).

Before exploring why this de-contextualization might not be desirable in some ways, it is worth recognizing that had it *not* taken place, mindfulness would arguably not have taken off in the way that it has, given the largely secular nature of psychotherapeutic approaches in Western societies (King, 1999). Moreover, even in this decontextualized way, mindfulness has had a profound impact in diverse healthcare settings (Fortney & Taylor, 2010), as well as in other applied settings such as education (Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005). However, the point is that, while secularized clinically-focussed conceptions of mindfulness are valuable as far as they go, their value is nevertheless limited. In its original Buddhist context, mindfulness was embedded within a broader way of being – featuring an all-encompassing system of philosophy and practice – aimed at personal transformation. Removed from this context, its potential is thus arguably neutered and diminished. Kabat-Zinn himself has acknowledged this issue, despite – or perhaps *because* of – his pivotal role in pioneering secularized modes of delivery with his seminal Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). While of course still recognizing the value of MBSR and other such programs, he recently acknowledged that “*the rush to define mindfulness within Western psychology may wind up denaturing it in fundamental ways,*” and as such there is “*the potential for something priceless to be lost*” (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011, p.4).

However, in light of these concerns, now that mindfulness *has* generally been accepted in the West – particularly in empirically driven fields such as medicine (Fortney & Taylor, 2010) – we are beginning to see emergent efforts to *re*-contextualize it. This means rendering its connection to Buddhism more explicit, and harnessing relevant Buddhist theory and practice to enhance the teaching and practice of mindfulness in healthcare contexts. This shift towards re-contextualization is reflected in the emergence of what Van Gordon, Shonin, and Griffiths (2015) refer to as ‘second generation’ mindfulness-based interventions, which are overtly spiritual in nature, in contrast to secularized ‘first generation’ interventions such as MBSR.

Clearly, there are many ways in which mindfulness can be re-contextualized, since Buddhism comprises such a rich, complex body of teachings, encompassing numerous schools of thought. In broad terms, there are three main Buddhist branches: *Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, and *Vajrayana*. *Theravāda* – the ‘Doctrine of the Elders’ – came into being around the first century B.C.E., its emergence intertwined with the formation of the ‘*Pāli* canon,’ in which the Buddha’s teachings were preserved in writing (Collins, 2005). The term *Mahāyāna* is then an overarching label for the diverse schools of thought that began to take shape in the first century C.E., which started developing the Buddha’s teachings in innovative ways, such as the dialectical philosophy of Nāgārjuna (Walser, 2013). Finally, *Vajrayana* denotes a further phase of philosophical and ritualistic development that occurred from the third century C.E. onwards, particularly in Tibet (Davidson, 2003). Each of these branches itself then comprises numerous traditions and schools of thought, each of which developed their own systems of teaching and practice. For instance, among the traditions regarded as constituting the *Mahāyāna* branch is Zen, which came into being with the transmission of Buddhism to Japan around the 12<sup>th</sup> Century (though its roots trace back further into China, as explicated below).

And it is Zen that the current paper focuses upon, doing so as a means of offering one avenue of re-contextualization. More specifically, the paper explores the way in which Zen helped produce a set of aesthetic principles that came to be influential in Japanese culture. However, these principles are not simply a historical curiosity, nor are they merely of interest for what they reveal about Japanese culture. Indeed, as the current paper will seek to demonstrate, these principles can potentially be cultivated and practiced by all people – Japanese and non-Japanese, Buddhist and non-Buddhist – to improve levels of psychosomatic wellbeing, as well as foster a better understanding of what it truly means to embrace the path of mindful living.

## **Zen**

Buddhists within the Zen tradition date their lineage back to the Buddha himself, as reflected in what is referred to as the Flower Sermon. In this story, the Buddha is depicted as being with his close disciples by a quiet pond. Reaching into the water, he pulls out a lotus flower, and asks each disciple to expound upon the meaning of the flower in the context of his teachings. While most present attempt to fashion elaborate discursive explanations, a disciple named Mahākāśyapa is said to have simply smiled. This smile was interpreted, in the story, as signifying his wordless understanding of the essence of the Buddha’s teaching, leading the Buddha to anoint him as his successor.

Interestingly, this sermon is not in the original *Pāli* canon, but is thought to be of Chinese origin, making its first appearance in a compilation of *kōans*, usually referred to in English as The Gateless Gate, published in 1228 (Dumoulin, 1979). Nevertheless, the sermon is illuminating in terms of what it reveals about how Zen regards itself, in particular the notion of the ‘wordless’ transmission of insight. This notion is encapsulated in the following definition, attributed to Bodhidharma, which captures Zen’s *raison d’être*: “A special transmission outside the scriptures; No dependence on words and letters; Direct pointing to the mind of man; Seeing into one’s nature and attaining Buddhahood”

(cited in Edwards, 2001, p.157). Mahākāśyapa's smile can thus be seen as symbolizing this process of direct, 'wordless' insight and enlightenment.

Bodhidharma, author of the above definition, is generally regarded as the first 'Patriarch' of Zen, i.e., the foundational figure who inaugurated the tradition. Bodhidharma was an Indian monk who played a pivotal role in transmitting Buddhism into China, reportedly travelling there in 520 AD to disseminate the teachings. One influential reading of the origin of Zen was that it was the result of Bodhidharma's teachings – and the teachings of other such figures – being shaped by, and interpreted through the lens of the worldviews and cultural practices that were dominant in China at the time (Suzuki, 1961). Until that point, Buddhism had been strongly shaped by the Brahmanic context in which it first emerged (i.e., the Indian subcontinent where the Buddha lived and taught). For instance, Brahmanism included elements of polytheism, and tendencies towards abstract metaphysical analyses (King, 1999). These types of features thus often crept into *Mahayana* Buddhism, leading to a proliferation of mythological and esoteric schemas. Without wishing to indulge in broad-brush generalisations, it has been argued that Chinese culture was less given to these kinds of speculative, mythological metaphysics, preferring more 'direct' modes of discourse and analysis (Dumoulin, 1979). And, it was through this cultural prism that Buddhism came to be understood locally, thus giving rise to the tradition of Zen.

In particular, the development of Buddhism in China is thought to have been influenced by the Taoist tradition that was culturally dominant in China (alongside Confucianism). Key features of Buddhism were of course retained, not least the possibility of enlightenment, and the value of meditation as a means towards 'attaining' this. Indeed, Zen itself means meditation; or more accurately, Zen is a Japanese rendering of *ch'an*, which was the Chinese term for the Indian word *dhyana*, which roughly means meditative absorption. But Buddhism in China began to take on a unique flavour as it became interpreted and understood through Taoist concepts (Kirkland, 2004). Taoism refers to a system of thought and practice centred on the notion of the *Tao*, a concept which resists definition by its very nature, but which essentially refers to a type of 'ground of being.' For instance, Oldstone-Moore (2003, p.6) describes it as a "*nameless, formless, all pervasive power which brings all things into being and reverts them back into non-being in an eternal cycle.*"

The essence of Taoism is that liberation can be found by living 'in accordance' with the Tao, a teaching which can be interpreted as not resisting the way of nature (Hermann, 1990). For instance, Taoism taught the notion of *wu-wei* – as articulated by Chuang Tzu (circa 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC) – which translates as non-action, but which really means surrendering to and aligning oneself with the Tao, allowing one's actions to be as "*spontaneous and free-flowing as the natural world,*" as Chuang Tzu put it (cited in Ho, 1995, p.120). As Smith (1972, p.77) explains, "*Human beings, by turning away from the Tao, bring suffering and chaos into their affairs.*" Conversely, liberation is found through living in harmony with the natural operations of the Tao. As expressed in Verse 47 of the *Tao Te Ching*, "*Mastery of the world is achieved by letting things take their natural course.*"

These ideas influenced the local interpretation of Buddhism in China. For instance, from the Taoist principle of *wu-wei* was derived the idea that enlightenment did not have to involve an arduous sequence of mental training or a gradual ascent to the summit of spiritual development. Rather, in one influential (though not uncontested) reading of Zen, Grigg (1938) argued that ‘all’ that is needed to attain enlightenment, from the perspective of Zen, is to act naturally and spontaneously in accordance with the Tao. This suggestion is evident in one of the first clear statements of Zen, attributed to Seng-ts’an (circa 600 AD), in his poem *Hsin-hsin Ming* – the Treatise on Faith in the Mind – which states: “*Follow your nature and accord with the Tao; Saunter along and stop worrying... Don’t be antagonistic to the world of the senses, For when you are not antagonistic to it, It turns out to be the same as complete awakening*” (cited in Watts, 1957, p.109). This notion that liberation consists in following one’s nature is reflected in the famous definition of Zen given by Po-Chang (720-814 AD), “*When hungry, eat; when tired, sleep.*”

Indeed, the person realizes that since they are an expression of the Tao, there is no way they *cannot* act in accordance with it. Thus, there is no need to strive towards Buddhahood (i.e., becoming enlightened); rather, the task is to recognize that one *already* has a ‘Buddha nature.’ Consequently, Zen places great emphasis on the possibility of ‘sudden’ awakening; an immediate realization in which one sees through the illusory construct that is one’s ego, and grasps in its completeness one’s Buddha nature. Of course, although attaining this kind of spontaneity or recognition of one’s Buddha nature is ostensibly presented in Zen as a simple act, in reality it is anything but (McWilliams, 2015). For this reason, great emphasis is still placed upon intensive meditation, and other prescriptions and practices, as diligent means of preparing the ground for this sudden awakening (Sharf, 1993). Among these practices, Zen found that a particularly effective vehicle for communicating and inculcating its ideas was artistic engagement and appreciation, as the next section explores.

### **Zen Art**

In Zen, art is seen as an especially potent way of communicating spiritual truths, indeed far more so than discursive prose. Zen constantly seeks to eschew and overcome the limitations of conceptual thought, and to ‘point directly’ into the ‘suchness’ (i.e., nature) of reality. As Chung-yuan (1977, p.xvii) put it, its aesthetics are “*not a rational system of thought, but a direct, intuitive experience, which contains within it certain basic, profound and subtle meanings essential to the attainment of the One.*” Art is uniquely effective at just this kind of pointing; indeed, Hermann (1990) describes art as the *most* effective (though still inadequate) vehicle for truth. In Zen, artistic creations enable adepts to reveal and express their spiritual insights, highlighting their direct seeing into the nature of reality. Moreover, simply learning to appreciate Zen aesthetics – i.e., without necessarily practising oneself – can also be a potent route to spiritual illumination. As such, Bai (2002, p.12) reports that Zen “*pervaded the arts and crafts, indeed all aspects of everyday life*” and rendered them vital expressions of, and ways towards, spiritual experience. This helped to universalize and democratize Zen Buddhism, bringing it out from the monastery and into people’s daily lives.

The centrality of art and aesthetics to the experience and teaching of Zen came to particular prominence when *ch'an* was introduced into Japan in 1191 by the Japanese monk Eisai (1141-1215), who founded the Rinzai school – based on the teachings of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century Lin Chi – and later by Dogen (1200-1253), who founded the Soto school. Throughout subsequent centuries, the special role afforded to art and aesthetics in Zen Buddhism became entwined with the rich diversity of activities that were already valued – i.e., aside from their connection to Buddhism – within Japanese culture, from flower arrangement to swordsmanship, poetry to painting. These activities then became harnessed and developed as vehicles for teaching and engendering the types of qualities and experiences at the heart of Zen.

Take *chadō*, the Japanese tea ceremony, for example, as elucidated by the Tea Master Takuan Soho (1573-1645). Interpreting his work, Hammitzsch (1979) suggests it comprises four key concepts. *Kei*, or reverence, refers to mutual deference and respect from the participants, and concomitant control of the ego. *Wa*, or harmony, reflects the experience of nonduality, in which the self does not stand apart from the other, but participates in a union of 'interbeing' (Nhat Hanh, 2000). *Sei*, or purity, signifies that the heart-mind is free from the turbulent emotions which usually tend to disturb its equanimity. Finally, *jaku*, or tranquillity, refers to the nature of the resulting untroubled mind. Such analyses abound in Zen, depicting the significance of art forms ranging from archery to poetry (Suzuki, 1961).

However, rather than the specific art forms themselves, it is the aesthetic principles associated with Zen that are of greatest relevance to the scope of this paper. These principles not only span these different art forms – e.g., being applicable to both poetry and painting – but transcend them. That is, the aesthetic principles are not simply ways of appreciating or engaging in artistic pursuits, but at a deeper level constitute a *way of being* (Hisamatsu, 1971). They reflect and encapsulate ideas that are at the heart of Zen Buddhism, and can be embodied and instantiated to improve health-related wellbeing, and quality of life more generally. Indeed, their manifestation in artworks can arguably be seen as simply the 'natural' way in which someone who embodies these principles would create art.

To give one example, an aesthetic quality that is particularly admired in Zen Buddhism is *kanso*, which translates as simplicity. In living simply, a person could be said to be embodying various ideas that are central to Buddhism, such as striving to lessen attachment and craving. Such simplicity as a 'way of being' would then naturally and inevitably be reflected in the way that the person engaged in activities that can be regarded as artistic, and similarly would be embodied in the artworks themselves. Consider for instance the ostensibly 'simple' form of poetry that is the haiku. In commenting on a haiku by Basho, Purser suggests (2013, p.45) "[The haiku] is a poetic expression of an unmitigated apperception that is direct, intimate, and expressive of an acute sensual experience." Moreover, Purser argues that this type of unmitigated apperception constitutes a perfect expression of mindfulness: "This form of perceptual awareness is also called "bare" or naked attention, or moment-to-moment attentiveness — or "mindfulness" — to whatever is happening, without habitual



*discriminative thinking and its associated emotional reactions.*” Thus, Purser’s comment illustrates our central point here: that Zen artistic expression and appreciation can be reflective of, and indeed a vehicle for, living ‘mindfully.’

The aesthetic principles outlined below have been so influential and pervasive in Japanese culture that they are often simply referred to as ‘Japanese aesthetics,’ rather than Buddhist aesthetics per se (Keene, 1969). However, these principles are arguably relevant to all people, not simply people who are Japanese (whether Buddhist or not). Indeed, we would arguably be guilty of an ‘orientalist’ attitude (Said, 1995) – of ‘Othering’ Japan as the ‘mystic East’ – if we were to regard these principles as somehow only particular to a Japanese mind. Just as mindfulness itself has been adopted and embraced by the West, it would seem reasonable to suggest that these principles might likewise be useful and relevant to Western audiences.

So, what are these principles? Over the years, numerous scholars have sought to adumbrate the principles inherent in Zen art, including Waley (1922), Watts (1957), Suzuki (1959), Munsterberg (1965), Hisamatsu (1971), Addiss (1989), and Purser (2013). We will focus here on the seven principles identified by Hisamatsu (1971) in his classic text *Zen and the Fine Arts*, since his elucidation is generally regarded as the most influential and widely-used (Purser, 2013). These seven are: *kanso* (simplicity); *fukinsei* (asymmetry); *koko* (austere sublimity); *shizen* (naturalness); *daisuzoku* (freedom from habits); *sei-jaku* (tranquillity); and *yūgen* (profound grace). These will be outlined in turn. Furthermore, in each case, attempts will be made to show how these principles have the potential to improve health-related wellbeing and foster mindful living.

### ***Kanso* (Simplicity)**

The first of Hisamatsu’s (1971) aesthetic principles is *kanso*, which refers to “*beauty in elegant simplicity*” (Purser, 2013, p.40). It speaks to the value of an absence of clutter, the omission of the non-essential. It refers both to (a) surface form (i.e., the arrangement of material phenomena in space and time), and (b) underlying concepts (i.e., the abstract idea expressed or signified by the material phenomena). Zen places a premium on the potential of art to “*express great beauty and convey powerful messages through simplification*” (Reynolds, 2008, p.113). Thus, as with all the principles here, there is an inherent harmony and connection between form and concept.

The importance and significance of simplicity can be considered in a number of ways. First, there is a sense that “*stripping away deceit*” and ornamentation, as Kozyra (2013, p.17) puts it, enables one to get “*to the essence of things.*” Similarly, Bai (2002, p.3) speaks of the necessity of cutting through conceptual, discursive thought, and of directly coming “*face-to-face with the suchness of the world.*” In doing so, there is the possibility of gaining direct apprehension and insight into the nature of the world, into “*reality in its isness*” (Suzuki, 1959, p.17) . This type of understanding is pivotal to Buddhism, as reflected in the notion of ‘right view’ in the Noble Eightfold Path. Thus, Zen art which is characterized by its simplicity is regarded as being uniquely able to capture and convey

the ‘isness’ of reality. For instance, Bai (2002, p.14) highlights the celebrated ‘frog’ haiku by Basho, which is thought to have marked the attainment of Basho’s own enlightenment:

The old pond.  
A frog leaps in;  
And a splash.

As Bai (2002) elucidates, this poem strips perception down to its essence. There are no wasted words, just the bare ‘facts’ of the event. Indeed, the semiologist Roland Barthes (1982, p.78) argued that whereas we usually perceive and understand reality through the medium of discursive descriptions, haiku aimed for the “*end of language*,” enabling a direct “*apprehension of the thing*” in itself, an “*awakening to the fact*” of reality as it is.

The importance of simplicity pertains not only to the perception or expression of art, but to a comprehensive *way of being*. Simplicity in art is a manifestation of the artists’ attainment of a simplicity of being, as reflected, for example, in the way Basho’s haiku is regarded as an expression of his enlightenment. Living ‘simply’ can be linked to concepts that are integral to Buddhism. Foremost among such concepts are the notions of non-attachment and non-craving. In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha identified attachment and craving as being the root cause of the suffering or dissatisfaction – often referred to using the Pāli term *dukkha* – that is said to characterize existence (Van Gordon, Shonin, Griffiths, & Singh, 2015b). (Its other two characteristics are impermanence (*anicca* in Pāli) and insubstantiality (*anattā*).) As such, eliminating attachment and craving are identified as the pathway to the ending of *dukkha*.

Simplicity associated with lessening or cessation of attachment and craving is reflected in all aspects of the Buddhist monastic life, which promotes an austere existence, featuring a minimum of personal possessions (Jendy & Chodron, 2001). However, the value of simplicity is not only the province of Buddhists or artists. Simplicity as a way of living and as a state of mind has profound implications for personal well-being. Brown and Kasser (2005) note that mindfulness is associated with lessened desire to amass possessions or to seek status objects, both of which tend to lower well-being and diminish prosocial behaviour. People report being happier after simplifying their lives (Alexander and Ussher, 2012) and simplifiers have higher life satisfaction (Brown and Kasser 2005). Consequently, those involved in the ‘voluntary simplicity movement’ advocate a lifestyle of lower consumption, not only as a means towards more environmentally-friendly behaviour, but as a route towards one’s own wellbeing. For instance, Marie Kondo (2014) wrote an international best seller on the aesthetics of de-cluttering, a ‘Japanese art’ that she says can “spark joy” and create “spaces of serenity and inspiration.” Mindfulness is reflective of – and indeed can help engender – this type of simplicity, enabling it to be incorporated into the small acts of daily living.

Finally, simplicity is also a state of mind, an attempt to achieve direct apprehension of the world as is. In a fascinating brain imaging study of pain, Gard et al (2012) found that experienced

mindfulness practitioners reported significantly less pain unpleasantness and anticipatory anxiety during a mindful state than did control subjects. Of key importance, mindfulness practitioners' brains also exhibited a unique neural signature characterized by increased sensory processing of the pain sensation itself accompanied by cognitive disengagement. That is, rather than attempt to cope with pain through strategies such as distraction or cognitive reframing, practitioners heightened the focus on the sensory properties of pain itself, while also cognitively disengaging from it. The success of this approach to pain management has profound implications, with the authors arguing the finding has direct clinical relevance in terms of "*empower[ing] patients with a new way of regulating pain*" (p.2700).

***Fukinsei* (Asymmetry / Irregularity)**

The second aesthetic principle identified by Hisamatsu (1971) is *fukinsei*, which refers to asymmetry or irregularity. This is a hallmark of Zen art, which tends to eschew regular, geometrical shapes, instead preferring representations that are "*jagged, gnarled, irregular, twisting, dashing, sweeping,*" as Looi (2005, p.176) puts it. This irregularity is epitomized in what is arguably the pre-eminent symbol of Zen, the *ensō* (i.e., circle), as depicted in figure 1 below.



***Figure 1: An example of a Zen ensō***

There are various reasons for this preference for irregularity. First, simply in terms of representational accuracy, this kind of aesthetic is regarded as being truer to the natural world that the art is depicting, since this world is inherently asymmetric and irregular. Thus, as with the principle of simplicity above, the principle of *fukinsei* is valued as pointing directly to the ‘isness’ or ‘suchness’ of reality. As Loori (2005, p.176) explains, a Zen painting “acts as a visual *kōan* or sermon whose teaching is offered through very concise, direct pointing.” But the value of *fukinsei* goes beyond faithfulness to nature. It aims to express what Purser (2013, p.42) describes as the “*perfection of imperfection*”. This refers to the Taoist perspective that all phenomena are a ‘perfect’ expression of the *Tao*, and thus are never incomplete or lacking. Moreover, irregularity is inherently ‘unstable’, thus capturing the dynamic and continually changing nature of the organic world. Consider how the *ensō* above gives the impression of movement and change – as if capturing the fluidity of water, for instance – in a way that a uniform, symmetrical and regular circle would not.

The quality of the irregularity is also prized as reflecting the spontaneous skill of the artist. In contrast to the continual ‘reworking’ or refining that characterizes Western art, Zen paintings are prized for being created spontaneously, in a “*single breath, like some perfect action that reflects the enlightened character of the artist*” (Loori, 2005, p.176). This principle even impacts the choice of materials used to create the art. As Purser (2013, p.42) explains, using black ink on silk or thin paper means that the artwork needs to be executed “*in a single stroke of the brush, emphasizing a spontaneous and free movement of the hand,*” since “*premeditation, hesitancy, or any afterthought would immediately show.*”

As with *kanso* above, the key question, from the perspective of this paper, is the relevance of *fukinsei* to the goal of mindful living, and thus to health and wellbeing. Perhaps most pertinent is the notion of accepting and following one’s own nature, which inevitably and intrinsically comprises imperfections and irregularities. From a Taoist perspective – which influenced the formation of Zen, as outlined above – liberation is found through living in harmonic accord with the *Tao*, an ‘achievement’ represented by the Chinese term *Te* (Kirkland, 2004). This would include going with the grain of one’s character, including its inherent irregularities. The *fukinsei* notion of accepting and embracing one’s irregularities appears to be consonant with contemporary conceptualizations of mindfulness, which tend to emphasize the importance of imbuing one’s awareness with a spirit of non-judgemental acceptance (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Similarly, in emphasising acceptance, *fukinsei* resonates with recent studies of the practice of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), which has been found to be effective in engendering mental health across a wide range of disorders and populations (Hayes, 2004). Indeed, ACT was strongly influenced by Buddhism, and particularly its teachings relating to acceptance (Hayes, 2002).

In aesthetic terms, *fukinsei* can be seen as the acceptance of imperfect beauty. In Western art and science, symmetry and beauty have tended to be linked, whether in lauding the perfection of

classical art and architecture, or in marvelling at the beauty of a flower or the human face. However, despite the frequent finding of beauty in symmetry, some theorists suggest that the truest beauty emerges from at least a hint of asymmetry, or as Edgar Allan Poe (1988, p.168) once said, from “*some strangeness of proportion.*” Rudolf Arnheim (1988) saw symmetry and asymmetry as opposing poles, one of “*order and law*” and “*stiffness and compulsion,*” and the other of “*arbitrariness and chance*” and “*liveliness, play and freedom*” (cited in, and translated by, Schummer, 2003, p.89). “*Somewhere at the ladder between the two extremes*” he wrote, “*every style, every individual, and every artwork finds its own particular place.*” Similarly, art historian Ernst Gombrich (1982) suggested that asymmetry could induce a sense of dynamism or movement.

In coming to appreciate asymmetry we move away from the privileging of the “perfect” in ourselves and in others, whether it be the search for the perfect face or body, the perfect work of art, or the perfect actions or feelings. We no longer impose impossible standards that lack self-compassion. By embracing asymmetry, we embrace the good, and the good enough, and celebrate its beauty. Indeed, “perfectionism” shows an inverse relationship with body image satisfaction cross-culturally, and is a risk factor for eating disorders and low self-esteem (e.g. Downey and Chang, 2007) while practicing self-compassion has been found to reduce body image dissatisfaction, and self-dissatisfaction more broadly (Albertson, Neff, & Dill-Shackleford, 2015).

### **Koko (Austere Sublimity)**

The third of Hisamatsu’s (1971) principles is *koko*, which can be translated as austere sublimity (Walker, 2011). The term relates to the discernment of beauty and depth in phenomena that are aged or ‘seasoned.’ According to Hvass (1999, p.17), *koko* captures the “*furrowed, cracked, wind-dried, scarred, decayed, weathered, crackled, signs of age, worm-eaten*” (cited in and translated by Walker, 2011). In terms of artistic execution, *koko* is above all managed through the use of space, giving “*form to what has no form*” (Suzuki, 1959, p.309). This process is what May (2010) calls a ‘subtractive approach,’ characterized by exclusion, omission, and restraint. As opposed to space being an inert container for phenomena, it is used in a dynamic way to give form to objects. This is reflective of the Buddhist notion that ‘form’ and ‘emptiness’ are interdependent, i.e., that form emerges from the pregnant emptiness of the ‘void.’ As Herrigel (1953, p.69) expresses it, “*space in Zen painting is forever unmoved and yet in motion, it seems to live and breathe, it is formless and empty and yet the source of all form, it is nameless and yet the reason why everything has a name.*” This meaningful use of space is exemplified in the painting shown in figure 2 below.



**Figure 2: Landscape traditionally attributed to Sesshu, 15th century, ink on paper, Honolulu Museum of Art accession 2846**

The principle of *koko* is closely aligned with the notion of *wabi-sabi*, which Watts (1957) argues is one of the three main ‘perceptual-emotional moods’ that Zen endeavours to evoke. (The other two are *mono no aware*, which refers to a ‘sensitivity’ to objects, and to a pathos at the transiency of life, and *yūgen*, our seventh principle here, outlined below.) Essentially, *wabi-sabi* captures the desolate beauty of aged or imperfect phenomena, and the reverential qualities of depth and meaning they can evoke. As Prusinski (2013, p.25) elucidates, *wabi-sabi* depicts “a crude or often faded beauty that correlates with a dark, desolate sublimity.” This sense is depicted by Tanizaki (1933, pp.11-12) in his classic exposition of Zen aesthetics ‘*In Praise of Shadows*.’ He describes preferring a “pensive lustre to a shallow brilliance, a murky light that, whether in a stone or an artifact, bespeaks a sheen of antiquity... We love things that bear the marks of grime, soot, and weather, and we love the colors and the sheen that call to mind the past that made them.” As with *fukinsei*, there is the sense here that we do injustice to life if we only value that which appears perfect and complete. We should not disdain phenomena for being imperfect, but rather value their unique gifts. This aesthetic emerges in *chadō*, in which flawed utensils are more prized than ‘perfect’ ones. Reactions to these items are thus seen as illustrative of a person’s understanding of life. As the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Sen no Rikyū put it, “There are those who dislike a piece when it is even slightly damaged; such an attitude shows a complete lack of comprehension” (cited in Hirota, 1995, p.226).

Again, the question is, how might a person profitably imbue their life and mindfulness practice with the principle of *koko*, and with the associated reflective mood of *wabi-sabi*? There are parallels with the discussion around *fukinsei* above, particularly in terms of acceptance. Whereas *fukinsei* pertained to acceptance of irregularity and asymmetry, *koko* relates more to acceptance of ephemerality and aging, of the truth of impermanence. This is vital, given that Buddhism holds that a

lack of acceptance of impermanence contributes to the ubiquity of *dukkha*, as outlined above. Our sorrow at the passage of time might be transmuted if we could see it with the spirit of *koko*. Indeed, Zen art aims at just this kind of ‘re-evaluation’ of beauty, finding value in what was previously judged to lack it (Cooper, 2013). For instance, Zen paintings often seek to capture the dignity of aged phenomena, like the bleak power of a withered tree in winter (as exemplified by the painting above). Similarly, Hammitzsch (1979) describes how the *chadō* ceremony is designed to induce a sense of *wabi-sabi* (among other qualities), e.g., in ideally being conducted in a secluded, time-worn tea house, with aged, antique utensils. As Prusinski (2013, p.32) explains, these elements strengthen “*one’s consciousness of space and time*” – including the relative impermanence and unimportance of the tea-taking participant themselves – *thereby creating a “heightened spirituality.”*

Thus, the spirit of *koko*, and the mood of *wabi-sabi*, are characteristic of the open, appreciative, non-judgemental approach of mindfulness. They reflect an acceptance and compassion for people and things as they are, in their natural imperfection. Instead of mindlessly craving the newest and shiniest object, or trying to emulate the celebrity of the moment, *koko* and *wabi-sabi* allows us to appreciate and find beauty in the old and the familiar, in the soft gleam of a well-worn utensil, in the shadows as well as in the light. When we turn away from craving and judgment, we can make peace with processes such as the passage of time, an attitudinal stance which has been linked to ‘successful aging’ (Knight & Ricciardelli, 2003). Similarly, these aesthetic moods allow us to be mindful of the beauty in the sound of rain, or even to find sweetness in a moment of sadness, rather than pre-judging these as ‘negative.’ This kind of conceptual re-appraisal – sometimes referred to as ‘benefit finding’ – has likewise been connected to improved mental health outcomes (Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006).

Thus, there are possible therapeutic implications here. For instance, the aesthetic of *koko* and *wabi-sabi* is reflected in an approach to ceramic repair associated with Zen, known as *kintsugi*. This involves mending broken pieces using gold lacquer, meaning that the fault lines are not hidden, nor merely accepted as blemishes, but rather are *accentuated* and made beautiful. As a metaphor, this process could be germane to therapeutic practices. For instance, theorists working with the concept of post-traumatic growth – defined as ‘positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises’ (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p.1) – have deployed the image of a broken vase to describe the phenomenon, whereby the person is encouraged to view their recovery as akin to refashioning the pieces of the vase into a meaningful configuration (Joseph, 2012). The concept of *kintsugi*, and its associated aesthetic principles of *koko* and *wabi-sabi*, carry the potential to bring additional depth and significance to the vase metaphor, and therefore to the healing process, helping people to find value, meaning, and even beauty in their struggles and imperfections.

### ***Shizen (naturalness)***

The fourth of Hisamatsu’s (1971) aesthetic principles is *shizen*, which translates as naturalness. In an artistic context, this refers to the avoidance of pretence, contrivance, or premeditation in the artwork

(Purser, 2013). We already touched upon this notion above, when we discussed how the Zen *ensō* should ideally be executed in one natural, flowing movement. With *shizen*, Hisamatsu (p. 32) explains that “*the naturalness referred to here is equivalent to such terms as ‘unrestrained,’ or having ‘no mind’ or ‘no intent.’*” It results when the artist “*enters so thoroughly into what he is creating that no conscious effort, no distance between the two, remains*” (p.32). And yet, with *shizen*, the goal is not simply to replicate nature, but to enter into the ‘spirit’ of nature in an intentional rather than a merely accidental or haphazard way, doing so through having cultivated a deep understanding of the phenomenon in question.

There is perhaps a parallel here with expert musicians, and the way that once they have learned the musical ‘rules’ (e.g., scales), they can effortlessly let melodies flow in a spontaneous way. Reynolds (2008, p.189) explains the ideal of executing *shizen* as follows: “*you need to know ‘the rules’. You must practice and then practice some more. When you put in the hard work in the preparation phase and internalize the material, you can perform your art in a way that is more natural by obtaining the proper state of mind, that is, ‘no mind.’*” An example of *shizen* is sometimes visible in the creation of Japanese rock gardens, such as the one shown in figure 3 below. With these gardens, the natural spontaneity of nature is captured in an intentional, conscious way, yet in a way that is ideally without premeditation or contrivance.



**Figure 3: Ryōan-ji garden, Kyoto, Japan.**

In terms of fostering a fuller understanding of authentic mindfulness practice, the ability to act naturally spontaneously, while being effortlessly reflective of one’s psychospiritual development, is arguably the very epitome of living mindfully. We saw above the importance to Zen of the Taoist notion of *wu-wei*, whereby liberation arises from allowing or enabling one’s actions to be as “*spontaneous and free-flowing as the natural world*” (Ho, 1995, p.120). As Seng-ts’an (circa 600 AD)



wrote in his seminal Zen treatise, “*Follow your nature and accord with the Tao... When you are not antagonistic to [the way of the world], it turns out to be the same as complete awakening*” (cited in Watts, 1957, p.109). Thus, just as Zen artists endeavour to allow their artistic creations to arise ‘naturally,’ in a fluid and uncontrived way, so might mindfulness practitioners aim to imbue their lives with this type of natural ‘effortless’ artistry.

Indeed, to a certain degree, this kind of behaviour already is already accounted for in Western depictions of mindfulness. For these advocate the practice of being ‘mindfully present’ to one’s actions, as opposed to either acting in a self-conscious, pre-meditated way, or behaving in an absent minded way while lost in discursive rumination (Kornfield, 2001). However, effectively implementing *shizen* arguably requires moving beyond the notion of ‘practicing mindfulness’, to that of simply ‘being mindful’. *Shizen* has resonance too with ‘flow,’ a state first identified by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as full immersion in an activity with a focus on the present moment. In a state of flow, for example when undertaking sports or playing music (de Manzano, Theorell, Harmat, & Ullén, 2010), the person loses self-consciousness and often lacks awareness that time is passing. Flow can occur in the mindful execution of any activity where the challenge of the task meets the skill of the doer. It is not the activity that produces flow but the ability to become fully immersed, neither anxious nor bored but utterly engaged. One might describe it as a state of bliss not aware of its blissfulness. It is an experience which research has found to be strongly associated with health and wellbeing, both directly, e.g., as a state that is appraised as contributing to a high quality of life (Bryce & Haworth, 2012), and indirectly, e.g., as a state that encourages people to engage in physical exercise (Mandigo & Thompson, 1998).

Similarly, there exists preliminary empirical evidence indicating that there are health-benefits associated with integrating the *shizen* principle into mindfulness practice. Specifically, a qualitative study involving middle-managers identified that when they cultivated a form of meditative awareness that was uncontrived and unrestrained, participants encountered something that the authors termed the ‘phenomena-feedback effect’ (Shonin & Van Gordon, 2015). The effect refers to participants’ ability to ‘enter into’ into the present moment, such that not only do they feel inseparable from it, but are able to more clearly foresee how the present moment is likely to unfold. In addition to improved decision making competency, participants related this ability to a reduced preoccupation with self, as well as increased levels of psychological wellbeing.

#### ***Datsuzoku (freedom from routine)***

Fifth, we have *datsuzoku*, translatable as freedom from habit, as escape from the routine and conventional. In terms of artistry, this means perceiving the world with absolute, pristine freshness, rather than through the stale prism of habitual discursive constructs. This primordial unfiltered openness to experience is described in Zen as ‘beginner’s mind.’ Take again the example of haiku, as discussed above. Here, the ideal, as realized to perfection by poets such as Basho, is to apprehend the world in an unmediated way, and to capture this apprehension in words that articulate the unrepeatable

uniqueness of the event that they are depicting. According to Loori (2005), “*to write haiku, to become this intimate with the moment, the poet must completely disengage, if only for an instant, all of her interpretive faculties. The mind must become one with the world, a detail of the world — the splash, a peach blossom, a neon sign flashing along the highway, the sound of a mountain stream.*” We can see this perceptive openness to detail in one of the most famous haiku, by Masaoka Shiki (1807-1902):

The sparrow hops  
Along the verandah,  
With wet feet.

With extreme economy, the poem startles with its vivid sense of *the moment*, perhaps above all captured by the subtle yet striking observation that the sparrow’s feet are *wet*. As asserted by Purser (2013, p.45), this kind of haiku is a “*poetic expression of an unmitigated apperception that is direct, intimate, and expressive of an acute sensual experience.*” The relevance of *datsuzoku* to mindfulness is perhaps the most self-evident of all the principles considered here: really, this type of direct, unfiltered perception *is* mindfulness, or at least is the core of mindfulness (which is then augmented by positive attitudinal qualities, like compassion or non-judgement). Although mindfulness can be conceptualized in different ways, many operational definitions centre on it being a broad receptive awareness, characterized by attentional qualities such as clarity, stability/continuity, flexibility and non-conceptual awareness (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). Thus, the type of perceptual freshness embodied in *datsuzoku* can be seen as crystallizing the essence of mindfulness. To see the world through the unfiltered, piercing gaze of Shiki or Basho *is* to be mindful. In that sense, the benefits to health and wellbeing of *datsuzoku* are reflected in the thousands of empirical studies showing the positive impact of mindfulness in that regard (Shonin et al., 2015).

### ***Seijaku (stillness / tranquillity)***

The penultimate principle identified by Hisamatsu (1971) is *seijaku*, which can be translated as stillness or tranquillity. This is a compound of *sei*, i.e., purity, referring to an absence of turbulent emotions, and *jaku*, i.e., tranquillity, which refers to the resulting nature of this untroubled mind. This principle can be regarded as applying to numerous facets of the artistic process, including: (a) the bearing and state of mind of the artist while the artwork is being created; (b) the composition and ‘feeling-tone’ of the artwork itself; and (c) the reaction evoked in the viewer. Of course, we are using ‘artwork’ here in a broad, all-encompassing sense, as the ethos of Zen is that all actions can be undertaken in an artistic spirit, and thus embody this sense of *seijaku*.

Consider for instance the art of *chadō*, as exemplified by Master Takuan Soho (1573-1645). As Tadashi and Yu (2011, p.7) explain, all procedural aspects of this “*way of Tea*” – from the pathway leading to the Tea house, to the way in which the Tea is served – are designed to carefully evoke *seijaku*, being so tranquil and harmonious as to “*guide the guests from their everyday mindset into a special state of consciousness.*” It is important though to not simply associate *seijaku* with

slowness or sedateness; it is ultimately a state of mind, which can be attained even in the midst of intense action, from martial arts (Hyams, 2010) to archery, as famously articulated by Eugen Herrigel (1953).

As with the other aesthetic principles above, the notion of stillness and tranquillity, even within the midst of movement, can be clearly linked to our overarching notion of augmenting health and wellbeing through living mindfully. Attempts to teach and facilitate mindfulness, such as the recent creation of MBIs, emphasize that mindfulness is not simply a sedentary activity, but is a receptive mental state with which one could imbue all one's activities. As such, many MBIs include activities such as mindful walking and mindful eating (Lomas, Ivtzan, & Yong, 2016), and there are even MBIs focusing specifically on movement, such as the mindfulness-based exercise program developed by Tacón and McComb (2009). Then, of course, there are kinship activities based around helping people bring qualities such as awareness, calmness, and poise to their movements, from Tai Chi (Yeh et al., 2004) to yoga (Rani & Rao, 1994).

Thus, in the context of teaching mindfulness, it might help to explicitly teach learners this notion of *seijaku*, and to regard it as quality with which they might aim to imbue their mindfulness. That is, many contemporary clinically-focussed formulations of mindfulness emphasise motivational and attitudinal qualities such as non-judgement and curiosity (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). For instance, Kabat-Zinn's (2003, p.145) widely-cited 'operational working definition' constructs mindfulness as 'the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.' Arguably, this definition could be augmented or improved if it also encompassed this notion of *seijaku* (e.g., it could begin, 'A receptive and tranquil form of awareness that emerges ...').

### ***Yūgen (profound depth)***

Hisamatsu's (1971) final principle is *yūgen*, which may also be the most difficult to translate. Parkes (2011) defines it as profound grace, and describes it as the most 'ineffable' of aesthetic concepts. In philosophical texts it can mean 'dark' or 'mysterious,' alluding to the unfathomable depths of existence, and the fundamental inability of the mind to comprehend these depths. As Suzuki (1959, pp. 220-221) elucidates, *yūgen* is a compound word, "*each part, yū and gen, meaning 'cloudy impenetrability,' and the combination meaning 'obscurity,' 'unknowability,' 'mystery,' 'beyond intellectual calculability,' but not 'utter darkness.'*" Similarly, Kaula (1960, pp. 69-70) describes it as the "*sense of the mysterious quiescence beneath all things.*" Thus, *yūgen* reflects the notion that the mystery of existence may be ineffable and elusive, and beyond rational understanding, but nevertheless can be sensed in some inchoate, intuitive way (Tsubaki, 1971). As Suzuki continues, "*It is hidden behind the clouds, but not entirely out of sight, for we feel its presence, its secret message being transmitted through the darkness however impenetrable to the intellect.*"

In artistic terms, *yūgen* is the subtle, mysterious hinting at depth and revelation. As Hisamatsu (1971, p.34) asserts, it involves "*an endless reverberation, which comes from a never completely*

*revealed bottomless depth. If content exhausts itself – if the process of disclosure finishes at any point – any reverberation will be similarly limited. But what appears out of a bottomless depth and never loses its entirety... has a reverberation beyond expression.”* By analogy, Hisamatsu urges us to bring to mind a person who does “*not baldy confront us with his abilities, but keeps them within, as if they were not there.*” The following haiku by Basho, is often regarded as the ultimate expression of *yūgen* (Watts, 1957):

On a withered branch  
A crow is perched;  
In the autumn evening.

As with the other six principles, *yūgen* is not simply an aesthetic ideal, to be striven for in art, but should ideally be experienced and embodied in one’s life. Indeed, as noted above, Watts (1957) argues that *yūgen* is one of the three main ‘perceptual-emotional moods’ that Zen seeks to evoke (along with *wabi-sabi* and *mono no aware*). Thus, *yūgen* means eliciting psycho-spiritual wellbeing through an awareness of the mysterious depths of existence, and implies being deeply moved to the core of one’s being, without quite knowing why. Kamo no Chōmei (1212) describes it in this way: “*It is like an autumn evening under a colorless expanse of silent sky. Somehow, as if for some reason that we should be able to recall, tears well uncontrollably*” (cited in Dyrness & kärkkäinen, 2008, p.65).

Arguably, Western psychology has identified states of experience that are similar to *yūgen*, the kind of profound, transcendental state described by Maslow (1972) as ‘peak experiences’ and by Wong (2009) as *chaironic* happiness. Deeply profound and moving, such moments go far beyond mere hedonic pleasure or even eudaimonic meaning, but shake the very core of one’s being. Here one surpasses all concepts, entering the realm of awe, in which one is rendered speechless, powerless and even terrified by the mysterious power and grace of the universe (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). However, what is unusual and potent about *yūgen* is the apparently ‘ordinary’ nature of the phenomena that can evoke it, as reflected in Basho’s haiku. Western conceptions of peak experience tend to imply that these can only be experienced on some literal or metaphorical (e.g., developmental) peak. With *yūgen* though, there is the profound experience of the ordinary – which is within everyone’s reach – being revealed as extraordinary, as if lifting a veil on the sacred.

The potential for *yūgen* to foster wellbeing appears to be supported by findings from a study involving patients suffering from fibromyalgia (Van Gordon, Shonin, & Griffiths, 2016). The research found that mindfulness helped participants encounter spiritual profundity both within and outside of themselves, and that this, in turn, gave rise to salutary health outcomes. For example, one of the study participants stated: “*But by just sitting and being with myself, I’m starting to realise that there is this whole other part of me*” (p.404). Thus, participants suggested that identifying with this deeper aspect of themselves, and the world they live in, had the potential to reduce both psychological distress and somatic pain. As such, the cultivation of *yūgen* may, perhaps even more than the other principles

above, enable people to not ‘only’ live mindfully, but to attain states of elevated wellbeing and profundity.

### **Conclusion**

The context for this paper was the concern that the largely secular ‘de-contextualized’ way in which mindfulness tends to be taught and practiced in the West is undermining its potential to improve both psychosomatic and spiritual wellbeing. As such, there are emergent efforts to ‘re-contextualize’ mindfulness, drawing on the wider framework of Buddhist ideas and practices in which it was initially developed. This paper aimed to contribute to this, doing so by focusing on Zen Buddhism, and in particular on Zen aesthetic principles. It focused on the seven principles identified by Shin’ichi Hisamatsu (1971) in his classic text *Zen and the Fine Arts*: *kanso* (simplicity); *fukinsei* (asymmetry); *koko* (austere sublimity); *shizen* (naturalness); *daisuzoku* (freedom from routine); *sei-jaku* (tranquillity); and *yūgen* (profound grace).

The presence of these principles in artworks reflects and communicates insights that are at the heart of Buddhism, such as simplicity, tranquillity and non-attachment. Furthermore, over and above their application to the creation and appreciation of art, the aesthetic principles have the capacity to improve health-related wellbeing, and to foster a more embodied and authentic understanding or mindfulness. Mindfulness, as taught by the historical Buddha some 2,500 years ago, almost certainly influenced the style and format of Zen aesthetics when they became established following the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Our hope is that these Zen aesthetic principles can now be used to influence and enhance our understanding of mindfulness, amidst concerns that its ‘spiritual essence’ is being lost (Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2014). We also hope that this paper will provide the foundation for empirical investigations into potential of the aesthetic principles to inform the design of mindfulness-based treatment approaches as well as to facilitate authentic mindful living.

### **Compliance with ethical standards**

This article was unfunded. The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest. No human or animal participants were involved.

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